During most of their post-independence lifetimes, small and weak Arab states used to surrender the business of intricate regional politics to their bigger and stronger brothers. In the Arab region of the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia would take the lead and the rest would follow. In North Africa, Algeria and Morocco would, more or less, play the same role. Smaller states would consequently be enticed, or forced, to join rival alliances with this “big brother” or that. Zooming into the Gulf area specifically, Saudi Arabia used to hash out regional political routes then shepherd other smaller states in their directions. Saudi leadership enjoyed bold endorsemen with the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 bringing six Gulf countries (UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain in addition to Saudi Arabia) under a regional cooperative umbrella. The GCC, although a loose system that falls far short of full integration, was meant to bring nervous Arab Gulf countries together in order to face up to the rising threats of Iranian and Iraqi regional ambitions especially after the 1979 triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran. Within this broad context, Qatar was part of the Saudi axis, and remained so until 1995 when its current Emir, Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani, overthrew his father in a bloodless palace coup, changing Qatar’s fortunes and politics radically, and perhaps for quite some time. Since then, Qatar broke ranks with its Arab big brothers, especially Saudi Arabia, and started formulating its own independent foreign policy. Over the following years, a combination of young ambitious leadership and enormous wealth transformed what used to be a negligible small peninsula into an assertive political actor in the region.

Yet the radical change that was brought about by the Emir continued to face strong opposition by “two big brothers”: Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Both favored the Emir’s ailing and timid father who had always been under the wing of the Saudis. A year later, a failed military coup against the new leadership was exposed, and Cairo and Riyadh were accused of orchestrating it. This led the new Emir to adopt vigilant and, for some, hostile policies against the Saudis and the Egyptians. With vast gas resources having been discovered in the country, the Emir has sparked vigorous expansive projects and policies, domestically and regionally, covering a whole spectrum of areas, but all serving this new self-esteem foreign policy. It has become clear that the new approach meant to prove to all others that “size doesn’t matter,” refuting the belittling of the tiny country with its indigenous population at only 225,000 persons. Protecting Qatar by hosting the biggest American military base outside the US, the strategy was to cut out any regional third party (mainly the Saudis) that would want to control the smaller states in the Gulf. Swiftly, Qatar managed to carve out an astonishing (if not gambling) network of relationships with adversarial parties, each of which held specific and different interest. At one end, Qatar would maintain good relations with the US, all other Western countries and even Israel, if at a lesser levels. At another end, it would establish strong relationships with the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah movements, many Islamist parties and “rogue” countries (including Iran and Syria).

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The rising role of Qatar during the Arab Spring is in fact a continuation of its active and growing foreign policy over the preceding decade. During those years and in a number of protracted issues in the region it was the Qatari who have succeeded in mediation and brokering deals. To the south of Egypt, the Qatari have fronted efforts in Sudan to bring peace between the government and rebels in Darfur, while Cairo merely watched the situation for years. To the South of Saudi Arabia, the Qatari have also engaged the Yemeni government and the Houthis rebels in talks, gaining the confidence of both parties, while Riyadh merely watched the situation, again, for years. If both cases were showing Doha’s robust and successful diplomacy, they also exposed the ineffectiveness and indifference of those big Arab states and their failure to sort out the problems that were aggravating them in their backyard.

Then it was the Qatari who adroitly prevented Lebanon from sliding into yet another imminent civil war, in May 2008, by hosting the main Lebanese protagonists (and arguably engaging with other actors who are influential in Lebanon behind the scene) in its capital and striking a last minute agreement. On the Palestinian front, Doha maintained a very active role opening channels with both the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah and Hamas in Gaza. During the Israeli war against Gaza in 2008/2009 Qatar rivaled Egypt in calling for an Arab Summit in order to lead a concerted effort to stop the War. Later on, in February 2012, Doha succeeded in bringing the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas’s leader Khaled Mashaal to sign a surprising agreement for a national unity government. The culmination of all Qatari involvement in the Palestinian issue came in October 2012 when the Emir visited Gaza, in spite of the blockade, and promised aid and projects to stricken Gazans, and by so doing infuriated Washington, Tel Aviv and Ramallah at once.

Within the GCC, Doha remained active, yet keeping warm relations with Tehran (at least until the outbreak of the Syrian revolution) used to upset Riyadh and Abu Dhabi: Both have long experienced tensions with their frightening, nuclear-ambitious neighbor and its aggressive regional politics. Balancing out relations with all belligerent actors has therefore exemplified an astonishing exercise of proactive foreign policy, although it has come with risks and gambles.

The Qatari adventure is driven by the Emir himself who believes that there has been a regional leadership vacuum where he can step in against all odds related to his country’s size in terms of geography and demography. In this sense, then, Qatar’s assertive role is designed to compensate for the lack of Arab influence in the Arab region itself. If neither of the large Arab countries fill in the visible leadership vacuum in the region, the Arab sphere will be sliced between Iran and Turkey. Support for the Arab revolutions and their accompanying new generation of leaders, would maintain the favor of these emerging regional surges and grant vast credit to Qatar—all of which would fall within the Emir’s scheme of leadership.

The Arab revolutions have been genuine uprisings of the people against decades of authoritarian regimes and their oppression, corruption and family and clique exploitation of national wealth. The rapid spread and magnitude of these revolutions caught almost everyone by surprise. Not initially driven by any specific ideological force, the people in the Arab countries themselves have outpaced opposition parties of all colors, amassing regional and global sympathy. Conservative countries and political players could not keep up with the fast pace of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings of January 2011, fearing the challenges that could be brought about by these uprising and missing out on any opportunities that they could offer.

Qatar acted differently. It stood out almost as a unique country in the Arab region in welcoming and supporting the uprisings with seemingly little reserve. One could argue that the Qatari leadership saw the Arab Spring as the chance that it was waiting for in order to affirm its regional leverage and standing. Qatar’s immediate response to the Arab uprisings was
effective deployment of its media arsenal, diplomatic activism, financial support and even military backing if requested by some parties (as in Libya and Syria).

After swift and relatively low-cost successful revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and half success in Yemen, Qatar led Arab and regional efforts to support Libyans and then Syrians against their regimes. The Qataris assumed the rotating leadership of the Arab League in 2011, after asking the Palestinians, who were supposed to take that leadership for one year, to step aside for the events of the Arab Spring were much too sensitive for the Palestinians to handle. After the collapse of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes in February 2011, the Qatari capital Doha became the main regional hub for diplomatic and logistical support for the uprisings in Libya, Yemen and Syria. Representatives and spokespersons of these uprisings have become stationed and/or frequently visiting Doha, announcing declarations and statements. At an international level, the Qataris orchestrated the efforts within the Arab League to produce a demand to the United Nations (UN) to intervene in Libya, which facilitated the issuance of the Security Council resolution that allowed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to intervene against late Muammar Qaddafi and his regime by imposing a no-fly zone.

The Qataris have been trying to do the same against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. The case has proven to be far more difficult because of the vehement Russian and Chinese opposition to changing the regime and strong Russian and Iranian military support for the regime on the ground.

Doha and Washington seemed to be agreeing and welcoming the emergence, after bitterly long talks and arm twisting, of a broader representative body other than the SNC.

Still, the Emir of Qatar was the only leader in the region and beyond who called, as early as January 2012, for an Arab military intervention in order to end the bloodshed in Syria; repeating the same call in a speech before the UN in September 2012. Qatar’s backing of the Syrian revolution takes almost all forms: Diplomatic, media, humanitarian, financial and military. Doha is considered to be the main Arab capital for meetings of Syrian opposition parties. Recently, in November 2012, Doha hosted the extensive and much media-covered meetings of various Syrian groups, including the Istanbul-based Syrian National Council (SNC) who elected its new head there and oversaw the foundation of a broader opposition platform including the SNC.

Al-Jazeera: Qatar’s “Geo-Strategic Media”

All the above was, one could argue, difficult to achieve without the formidable media efforts deployed by Al-Jazeera. The brainchild of the Emir himself, the station has championed his forward-leaning, sprawling politics hand-in-hand, offering a new case for understanding the role of transnational modern media in furthering foreign policy.

This needs further contemplation. In classical approaches, the term “geo-politics” typically helps describe politics among nations. “Geo-economics,” later in the 1990s, was coined to capture processes of competition between political and economic rising powers within the context of the globalization. By extension

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and deriving from Qatar’s case, I offer here the term “geo-media” in an attempt to describe the more recent (and successful) dynamics of using the intensive transnational and global media by countries in order to compensate for weak, or lacking, aspects of their “geo-political” or “geo-economic” strengths. From a “geo-media” perspective we can then account more accurately for the parallel rise of Al-Jazeera’s influence and Qatar’s assertive foreign policy. Because of magnitude and impact of Al-Jazeera, Qatar was stimulated, then enabled, to circumvent certain existing shortcomings that a geo-political analysis could point at.

But when conventional media evolves into geo-media it creates its own semi-autonomous dynamics too; affecting politics and compelling its patron in some occasions to adopt positions which otherwise would not be necessarily adopted. It is a reversal process whereby the media that was supposedly made by the foreign policy of its creator becomes so influential to rebound and affect that same foreign policy. This may apply to Al-Jazeera where its unwavering supportive coverage of the first cases of the Arab Spring, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, made it extremely difficult for Qatari politics not to shift away from years of a friendly relationship with Assad’s regime when the revolution erupted there. In the first two or three weeks of the revolution Al-Jazeera was reluctant to undertake the same coverage that it granted to other uprisings, echoing reluctance at higher political levels in Doha. Failing to stay in the same line of strong support of Arab revolutions, by shying away from the Syrian popular revolt, Al-Jazeera would lose all the great success that it achieved, and with it the political clout that Qatar as a state had by then amassed. Promptly placing itself at the heart of the Arab Spring, Al-Jazeera had no option but to start gearing up support for the Syrians opposition, and consequently, speeded up the shift in the Qatari line vis-à-vis Syria. All in all, critics and exponents of Al-Jazeera (and Qatar) agree that since the inception of the station in 1996 its influence in the region along with the leverage that it allowed Qatar to accomplish is, quite simply, strategically impressive.

On the eve of the Arab Spring the station, as well as Qatar itself, was more than ready. With its global and unbeatable resources, Al-Jazeera mobilized all that it could to cover and support protesters in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, then Libya and Syria, coining from the start terms such as ‘revolution’ and ‘revolutionaries’. Days after the protests originated in Tunisia and spread afterwards to Egypt, the station was fully engaged in live coverage through its correspondents away from the eyes of local security, or by relying on social media networks streaming from the field. The screen of Al-Jazeera has been full of Arab masses conveying their powerful demand to the world: “The people want to overthrow the regime.”

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the channel to side with the people, reflecting the policy of the state itself. The accusations by the falling, ruling regimes that Al-Jazeera was not neutral in its coverage of the protest movements against them were in fact true. A widespread joke captures this by relaying a conversation that takes place in hell between the three Egyptian presidents, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, asking each other how they were killed. Nasser’s answer was “by poison;” Sadat’s was “by assassination;” while Mubarak’s answer was “by Al-Jazeera.”

In the cases where Al-Jazeera still managed to mount dozens of cameras for live broadcast, the around-the-clock coverage of massive crowds multiplied the popular spirit. More importantly, it provided protection to the masses being filmed exercising their peaceful revolution to the entire world and consequently paralyzed the might of the security apparatuses, since any crackdown on the protesters would be globally viewed. The live filming of hundreds of thousands of persistent and peaceful protesters attracted world attention and support, embarrassing the Western powers that had so longed backed the falling regimes (in Tunisia and Egypt) and compelling them to change policies and support the anti-regimes movements.

However, in the cases where the revolutions turned messy and bloody (Libya and Syria), the central role of Al-Jazeera in the Arab Spring would have been highly diminished had it not been for the advent of social media: Facebook, Twitter and mobile phones. Al-Jazeera correspondents were soon banned from entering these countries where protest was accumulating rapidly, but regime resistance had managed to retain a foothold particularly insofar as keeping control of media activity within its borders. Prepared and well-acquainted with this typical measure by Arab governments, Al-Jazeera announced dozens of phone numbers to receive calls and text messages from the streets, and set up ad-hoc websites to receive video clips taken by ordinary people. These hot feeds which would arrive within moments would be transmitted immediately giving the revolutionaries double service: Small and large scale events became amplified and made known to the entire population; and the population itself would know where to mobilize and gather. By the same token, had these hot feeds not been able to be broadcast at the largest scale, reaching an audience of millions by Al-Jazeera, the impact of this form of social media in these revolutions would have been minimal. Because of poverty and scandalously high illiteracy rates in the Arab world, the spread of computers and the penetration rates of Internet usage are low and not particularly reliable in mobilization processes. But everyone had access to television.

**Not all rosy**

Yet, Qatar’s ambitious bid for regional leadership in the post-Arab Spring era faces challenges and challengers. In the first instance, there is the credibility question. In the eyes of its critics, Qatar is an undemocratic state whose steps toward constitutional reform are frustratingly slow. Qatar spearheading support for overthrowing authoritarian regimes in the region is therefore perceived with skepticism. Almost in all cases of the Arab Spring critics have criticized Qatar for promoting externally the democratic system that it lacks internally. The Qatari response to this accusation hinges on the idea that unlike the masses in Arab Spring countries, the vast majority of the people in the country, as is the case in most GCC countries, are content with the status quo, at least for now. It is true that Bahrain, Oman and the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia have witnessed different levels of unrest, but all remained far short from reaching a tipping point where the entire people were mobilized against the ruling elite.

The credibility question was also raised forcefully when Al-Jazeera failed in covering fully, let alone supporting, the uprising in neighboring Bahrain, which proved to be the most difficult case of Arab Spring uprisings for the Qataris. The Bahraini protest was portrayed as being led by Shia groups that were supported by Iran against the Saudi-backed Sunni ruling family. For next-door nervous Saudi Arabia, Bahrain was a
bold red line where any prospect of the country falling in the hands of the Shia majority has always been perceived as a real national security threat. In fact, the Saudis took no chances with the Bahraini protest and when developments in the country seemed to be evolving beyond the control of the regime, Riyadh sent military troops under the auspices of the GCC and put off the uprising. Qatar approved the Saudi steps and seemingly neutralized itself on the Bahraini issue, perhaps because of the extra sensitivity and proximity of the issue. Additionally, and at a time when it has been too engaged with other cases of the Arab Spring, Qatar was rationally preventing itself from being spread too thin, especially in the Gulf area, and keeping the Saudis at bay without antagonizing them in Bahrain.

Another set of accusations revolve around the charge that Qatar has in fact been functioning as an American prawn in the region. Critics refer to Qatar’s hosting of the biggest American military base and to the country’s open door policy with Israel. During the Arab Spring, as the theory of American proxy goes on, Washington would ask Doha to undertake initial steps that would facilitate the implementation of American policies which would follow. Ironically, much of these accusations have been repeated by exponents of falling regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria – the first three were considered as close allies of the US, and the latter two used to try their best in order to have strong relations with the Americans. But more importantly, a closer look at Qatari and American regional politics exposes certain oddness and divergences between the two. Doha’s warm relationships with Hamas (and previously Hezbollah) among other Islamist movements have always been a source of tension with Washington. The recent visit to Gaza by the Emir along with his wife and a large delegation was heavily criticized by Tel Aviv and tellingly ignored by Washington. The Qatari officials seem to have been conscious on creating their own space of maneuverability despite their strong relationship with the US. One could date a gradual Qatari drifting from American foreign policy in the region by the War against Afghanistan in 2001, with tension peaking on occasion, mainly because of Al-Jazeera’s critical coverage of George W. Bush’s “war on terror” in Afghanistan first, then in Iraq 2003. Senior Americans then, including Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense, accused Al-Jazeera of being the mouthpiece of Al-Qaeda and its leader Osama Bin Laden.

Differences between American and Qatari positions regarding regional issues continued during the Arab Spring. In the very first two weeks of the Tunisian and Egyptian protests against the Zine el-Abedine Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes, the responses of Washington and Doha were different. Doha mobilized its media arsenal behind the revolutionaries, whereas Washington was more cautious hoping for maintaining the status quo except with the introduction of serious reforms. The only strong convergence in both approaches was, probably, on the Libyan case upon which there was effectively a worldwide agreement, making the common Qatar-American position unspectacular.

On the Syrian revolution, divergences and convergences between the two have emerged, with a balance sheet probably tilting more in the direction of the former: Doha has been advocating an Arab military intervention under the umbrella of the Arab League whereas Washington never accepted the idea or other forms of military intervention; the language used by the Qatari officials terms the situation in Syria as a genocide war launched by the regime against its people, whereas the official American discourse stayed far more cautious and closer to seeing the situation as a civil war; Doha had also been siding with the SNC since its inception, unlike Washington and its growing skepticism of the inclusiveness and effectiveness of the SNC. And finally, Doha has been pushing for upgrading the quality of the weapons that should reach the armed groups, whereas Washington objected, thus far, to any step in that direction, profoundly factoring into its policy formulation the future security of the state of Israel and any potential threats to the Jewish state that could
follow from the collapse of Assad’s regime. However, some of these divergences have been blunted after the Doha meetings of the Syrian opposition groups in November and their outcome. Doha and Washington seemed to be agreeing and welcoming the emergence, after bitterly long talks and arm twisting, of a broader representative body other than the SNC, where the “Islamist component” of this new structure is hoped, by Washington, to be less influential than it used to be within the SNC.

Another major challenge is the emerging perception within the countries of the “successful” cases of the Arab Spring that the Qataris have been meddling in their post-revolution domestic affairs. In the three countries where Qatar strongly supported the toppling of old regimes, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, there have been growing voices criticizing Qatari politics claiming that Doha favors and supports one force, mostly the Islamists, against the others. In fact, this broader perception of backing the Islamist parties, and specifically the Muslim Brotherhood parties, in these countries is somewhat puzzling to many observers. It remains to be answered as why the Qataris limit their influence to the Islamists and by doing so creating unnecessary enemies when they can enjoy greater leverage over most parties by staying impartial and friendly to all forces in the newly emerging democracies of the Arab Spring.

That said, Qatar’s assertive role in the region, and perhaps beyond, has met a long-standing demand by many Arabs that the fate of the region should not be left to foreign powers to decide on; and that the future of the people could and should be in their own hands and formulated in line with Arab interests first.

While it is true that the ascendance of a bold and assertive political player invokes foes and enemies, especially when the rising player has always been seen as small and under the thumb of others, this need no longer be the case considering the sharp contrast between Qatar’s active foreign policy and the almost inactive policies of its neighboring “big brothers” who sluggishly lagged far behind, both during and after the Arab Spring.

Endnotes

1 One exception to such ignorant diplomacy is the relative success of the Saudis in the Yemeni Spring that erupted against the authoritarian rule of the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Saudis brokered a compromise by which Saleh stepped down with guarantees granting him immunity from any future prosecution. The terms of the compromise are still hotly debated and controversy surrounded the deal, especially because many key positions in the military and state remained in the hands of pro-Saleh figures. The Saudi involvement in the Yemeni quagmire was provoked by fears that waves of regional uprisings are hitting the Saudi shores, so in essence it should be situated as more of a defensive act rather than a form of proactive diplomacy.